Robert Madden

Reexamining the Digital Divide

Week 6

Tomei (ed), Lawrence A.. "Chapter R - Reexamining the Digital Divide—Aesthetic Choice and Tech-Nos". Encyclopedia of Information Technology Curriculum Integration. IGI Global. © 2008. Books24x7. <http://common.books24x7.com.dml.regis.edu/book/id\_18674/book.asp> (accessed October 5, 2010)

The article begins by defining the digital divide as the disparity between those who have access to technology and those who do not. Cited in the beginning of the article is a 1995 study from the NTIA (National Telecommunications and Information Administration) that found a correlation between race, education level, income level and geographic location (rural vs. urban) and access to and knowledge of technological resources. The study found those with higher levels of education and income and who were living in more urban settings were more likely to have knowledge of and access to technological resources. According to the article, countless studies followed this one to expand on its findings.

The next part of the article takes apart each finding and uses subsequent studies to examine what is currently going on with the technological divide. My guess is that some of these studies are slightly dated, but not without value. For example, studies in 1999, 2000, and 2004 found that email was the most common usage of the internet regardless of income level. My guess is that email probably is the most common usage, but only because of workplace usage. If only personal usage were counted, I imagine that Facebook and/or Twitter would currently be the most common use of the internet. That being said, the point of Facebook and Twitter, like email, is to communicate. In other words, while the exact tool being used may have changed (email vs. Facebook/Twitter), the goal is still the same (to communicate). I think this is an important thing to consider when looking at how we incorporate the internet into our classrooms. Who are students communicating with? Who would it be appropriate for them to communicate with? Can we give them an authentic and safe audience to hone their communication skills with? Is it even ethical to deny them this ability even if it means only allowing them to communicate with other students within the school or district?

While this doesn’t directly apply to the classroom, there was one study about geographic location (urban vs. rural) that did have an intriguing finding. While it is no surprise that rural locations have less internet options and are slower to adapt new technologies, I did find it interesting that rural users, once able to get online, became daily users of the internet at a faster pace than their urban counterparts. I wonder, again, if this is a result of the internet primarily being used as a tool for communication; allowing the rural users to communicate with relatives or older friends who they could only call on the phone (long distance phone bills, remember them?) or would be a long drive away. Unfortunately, this article does not include a possible reason.

The article cites studies of gender differences in regard to internet usage. While women hold a slight advantage in terms of usage, the amount of time spent on the internet is pretty even. The only divide that exists, according to the article, is the type of usage and knowledge of terminology. Males tend to be more knowledgeable of terminology and advances in technology and are more likely to use the internet for recreation, whereas females are more likely to use it for communication or to research topics of personal interest to them. I wonder how applicable this is to the classroom given that students at the elementary level are still developing their identities. Will they follow these same roads because of gender models, hardwired gender traits, or will they blaze their own paths? Regardless of the answer, it is something to consider when trying to spark a recalcitrant student’s interest in computer use.

The article concludes by questioning the existence of the digital divide. The author cites those who concede that the gap has closed significantly and that there are those researchers who say it does not exist anymore due to reduced hardware costs. The author, however, also cites those who believe the gap has simply evolved into a question of technological literacy instead of access. This has been my observation. Children in white suburban schools tend to have computer access at home which gives them a leg up on typing skils, allowing them to take better advantage of school computers at a younger age than their Hispanic counterparts who tend to be in poorer areas and lack computer and/or internet access at home. This does not even get into the language divide where students who speak another language have to overcome those difficulties to effectively navigate the internet or compose a written product on the computer.

My own eyes tell me that a digital divide still exists in terms of both access and literacy. I agree with the article that it has been greatly reduced. With that in mind, I further agree with the article that the question is no longer what technologies are being used but how we are choosing to use them. My feeling is that communication will still be the primary objective of most technology users and we, as educators, need to find ways to take advantage of that.